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Plane Downed in Nicaragua Was in a U.S. Drug 'Sting'

By **RICHARD HALLORAN**

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 9 — The cargo plane that was shot down Sunday while taking ammunition to insurgents in Nicaragua was earlier involved in a United States "sting" operation against the Sandinista Government in Managua, the Drug Enforcement Administration said today.

A spokesman for the agency, Jack Hood, said in Miami: "With the best of information we have now, we believe that the C-123 that was shot down in Nicaragua was the same plane that was used in the Barry Seal operation."

Adler (Barry) Seal, a pilot and drug smuggler from Baton Rouge, La., who became an undercover informant for the Drug Enforcement Agency, flew the plane to the Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base in Ohio, where Central Intelligence Agency experts installed hidden cameras on it in 1984.

Mr. Seal then flew to Nicaragua and returned to the United States with 1,472 pounds of cocaine. The cameras filmed Federico Vaughn, whom American officials said was an employee of the Nicaraguan Interior Ministry, helping load cocaine into the plane.

The shipment was seized upon arrival. President Reagan referred to it in a television speech in March during which he criticized the Sandinista Government and sought \$100 million in aid to the insurgents, popularly known as contras. Mr. Seal was murdered in Baton Rouge in February.

New Denial From Singlaub

In another development here today, Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, the retired Army officer said by Reagan Administration officials to have arranged the flight of the arms-laden cargo plane, denied again that he had been involved in the operation.

At a news conference this afternoon, the general said: "I do not know who ordered the aircraft into the air. I want to assure you that it had nothing to do with me or any of my activities. The men who were killed were not in my employ." General Singlaub also denied any role in the affair in a telephone interview Wednesday.

In his statements today, General Singlaub also asserted that a statement made in Managua today by Eugene Hasenfus, the former Marine Corps parachute rigger who survived the crash, was "probably false." He added, "We can't afford to take a statement from someone who is acting under duress."

Mr. Hasenfus, who appeared before television cameras but did not answer questions from correspondents, said he had worked with C.I.A. employees in El Salvador and had made 10 covert flights into Nicaragua.

'I Wish I Knew'

The Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, Elliott Abrams, also disputed Mr. Hasenfus's statements. In a telephone call to The Associated Press, he said he was confident the Sandinistas were telling Mr. Hasenfus that if he said what they wanted to hear, he would be "out in no time," but that if he did not cooperate, he would be "in prison for 30 years."

General Singlaub, when asked who sponsored the mission, answered: "I wish I knew." He said: "My best theory is that it was a charter organization, and it's possible that the people who were on that crew were told by the charter company that this was an operation run by the C.I.A. But I am convinced that it was not a C.I.A. operation."

General Singlaub blamed Congress for the loss of three lives, two of them Americans, because it had failed to move ahead on a bill that would provide \$100 million in military aid to the contras. "This delay has just resulted in the loss of some American lives," he said.

He suggested that the flight would not have been necessary if Congress had approved the money. The bill is awaiting a conference to iron out differences between House and Senate versions.

'I Don't Know'

Despite General Singlaub's denials, Administration officials privately insisted again that he and his associates had arranged the charter flight, had purchased the arms and supplies to be delivered to the contras and had financed the operation.

General Singlaub said he had been assured by officials in the National Security Council and the State and Defense Departments that they had not pointed to him as the sponsor of the flight.

On the record, officials in the Administration continued to repeat President Reagan's answer to the question of who arranged the flight by saying: "I don't know." The President and others have said it was a private operation, not one run by the Government.

General Singlaub, asked whether he thought he was being made a scapegoat for this incident, said drily: "Needless to say, the thought has crossed my mind."

He suggested that Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, a retired Air Force officer, was "one of the people who might have some knowledge of this." But he said he had not been able to reach General Secord, who is associated with the Stanford Technology Trading Group in Vienna, Va., near Washington. An employee there said tonight that General Secord was away from Washington and could not be reached.

An F.B.I. Inquiry

In Miami, Paul Miller, a spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said the bureau had begun a "preliminary investigation" of a charter airline company, Southern Air Transport, to see whether it had violated the law in the case of the downed C-123.

F.B.I. agents visited the offices of Southern Air Transport Wednesday to look into the possibility that it had violated the Neutrality Act, which prohibits its private citizens from staging armed incursions against foreign countries from the United States.

According to records of the Aviation Department of Dade County, Fla., the aircraft was parked at Southern's base there from June 29 to July 26. It was away for four days, then was parked at the airline's base for four days before to its last departure from Miami, on August 4.

Officials in Washington have said the aircraft took off from El Salvador, flew down the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and turned inland toward a rebel unit operating in southern Nicaragua near the Costa Rican border. The Sandinistas said it was shot down there.

Southern's spokesman, William Kress, who at first denied the company had participated in military missions to Nicaragua, said Southern had performed maintenance for the C-123, which apparently was sold in 1983 by the Air Force.

The plane was evidently purchased by a California company, Four Aces Inc., of Palmdale, Calif., and then was sold to Doan's Helicopter, of Daytona Beach, Fla. Four Aces apparently has had a long record of contracts with the Federal Government.